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Birds of May
1871

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THE BIRDS OF MAY.

By F. P. S.

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JUNE, 1871.

THE BIRDS OF MAY.

AMONG the many pleasant things which are possible during the last two weeks of May, there is none more delightful than to watch the migratory birds in their return from the South. From far-off tropical regions they have come; and they bring a tropical brightness and gladness back with them. Most have seen the Florida Keys, many have wintered in the Antilles, and not a few know about the fragrant thickets of Guiana and Venezuela. The sober and prosaic Robin is with us at all seasons. When the snow disappears, he seems somehow to have been left behind it as a residuum; and he hops to and fro upon the wet and spongy soil, like one who suffers from cold feet. But he dives his bill in, and brings up a worm; and then we perceive what he is after. Late in March, too, the Bluebird arrives, — the first bit of color in the landscape. Then appear flocks of blackbirds, wheeling about like squadrons of aerial cavalry, and holding noisy conventions upon the tree-tops; next, numerous kinds of sparrows, appearing to be very much chilled, and as if they thought it a very ill wind indeed which had blown them northward so early in the season. Flocks of ducks and geese pass by, hurrying post haste for Labrador; but it is not until the third week of May that the real songsters of our gardens and woods arrive, — the birds of finest tone and brightest feathers. They march upon us like an army, and enliven every tree and bush with the vivacity of their spirit. Those who have only heard and admired their songs, and have never taken much pains to look for them, cannot

know what surpassingly beautiful, what interesting creatures they are.

Usually just after a storm — not one of our cold north-easters, but a warm, refreshing rain — we wake up in the morning, to find the Golden Robin in our garden, and the Bobolink in our meadows. Lord Baltimore has celebrated the one, and Mr. Bryant the other. And much more still might be said of them; for they are the heralds of summer, and with their rich, full-toned warblings give a new key-note to the morning choruses, overpowering the plaintive chirpings we have listened to all through April. Either by himself might be a theme for eulogy; and we are in doubt which to admire most, the Bobolink's black and buff-shaded white, or his cousin's splendid contrast of black and orange. Later the female Golden Robin becomes very disagreeable, playing havoc with the green peas, and crying out "hinney" in a fretful tone of voice; but that does not concern us now. Here we have the Summer Yellow-bird, — a lump of pure king's yellow, climbing the grape-vines, half on his legs and half on his wings. He has a sweet little song in the minor key, and must not be mistaken for the American Goldfinch; who is also quite yellow, but with a bright red bill, and remarkable in his appetite for hemp-seed. There goes one now, flying over the tops of the apple-trees with a beautiful billowy motion. Down he dives, and then up again, uttering three or four clear notes on the crest of every air-wave.

Are the family cats fighting and spitting at each other so early in the morning? No; it is a pair of Cat-

birds, who flirt their tails in your face, and plunge out of sight in the shrubbery. Many other sorts, too, we see and hear, but suspend our thought of them until we reach the woods; where they will again cross our path in greater numbers, and with more distinguished company.

The dark and lonesome depths of the forest primeval are not inhabited by many birds. A solitary Creeper, Titmouse, or Hemlock Warbler may be found in them; but the great majority prefer that open-and-shut sort of country, such as is common on the outskirts of our New-England villages. Especially are they fond of groves in which many different kinds of trees are represented.

In such a grove, near Pine Hill in Medford, one May morning, I noticed a little bird,¹ not four inches long, running up and down the stem of a young sapling. He was half black and half white, in narrow stripes, running from head to tail. He was foraging for insects, and seemed to prefer motion with his head down to the reverse. While watching and admiring his movements, I gradually became aware of a multitude of other birds, who were approaching me from all directions. They seemed to emerge from the foliage of the trees, like creatures of imagination rather than reality. They ran along the limbs, flitted from branch to branch, swung to and fro on the twigs, hiding in clusters of leaves, swooping through the air for insects, or gleaning them out of the crevices of the bark, each uttering at every other moment his own peculiar cry, and, whenever they crossed the sunlight, glittering like resplendent gems. More colors than the rainbow can boast of are represented in their

plumage. One¹ has an olive-green back and golden-yellow throat. His song is very melodious, and as stirring as a clarionet. Another² is clothed in green coat, orange-red cap, white vest, and knee-breeches, with a black Shakspeare collar round an orange-yellow throat. Another³ is a fine bluish gray, with a golden crown, and golden bands across his wings. Two more⁴ have yellow crowns, with variously mottled bodies; and perhaps the greatest beauty of them all is a slender little fellow,⁴ of not more than four or five inches, striped on his head with black and orange, and his breast a brilliant rosy orange, bounded by spots of black. He must not be mistaken for the American Redstart; who comes along presently, and whose coat is also of the blackest, with cherry-colored epaulets and trimmings. Then an Indigo-bird looks in at the edge of the covert from the huckleberry pasture, where he usually keeps himself. He is blue all over, from the base of his bill to the tip of his tail, but varied lighter and darker, and glistening with such green and purple reflections as one sees upon some ores of copper. His counterpart appears in the Summer Redbird; who in his turn is red all over, bright vermilion below and darker above, accompanied by his relative, the Scarlet Tanager, than whose scarlet color no more vivid red can be imagined, his black wings and tail marking, by most pointed contrast, the splendor of the rest of him.

There is the same difference between the color of a feather on the living bird, and one that is dead, that there is between a flower growing on its stalk, and the same plucked and

¹ The Black and White Creeper.

¹ Yellow-throated Vireo.

² Black-throated Green Warbler.

³ Golden-winged Warbler.

⁴ Blackburnian Warbler.

pressed for keeping. It is one thing to look through the glass of a showcase, at the dry and dusty stuffed counterfeit of a finch, and another to behold the real bird, where he naturally belongs, and in the full animation and illumination of his bright vivacious life. After death, the rarest and finest tints soon begin to fade. And, moreover, is it not the dewy freshness of the spring morning, which adds more lustre than any thing else, causing even your own eyes to be clearer and more appreciative? What loveliness! as if the rainbow, with heaven's smile upon it, had been broken into pieces, and here were the fragments flitting about. It is not a scene of still, passive, and unchanging beauty, like a picture's or a flower-garden's. There is the liveliest dramatic action; a mirthful comedy of the highest order is constantly performing. Every motion is so graceful and decorous, that the admiration of eye and ear is at once mingled with a sense of delight, deeper and sweeter than sound and sight alone can give.

Each fresh arrival on the ground excites new interest and enthusiasm; until by close approach, or the use of an opera-glass, we discover who he is. If some signal beauty like the Redstart or Tanager flies off to other groves, it is felt like the early departure of a belle from the ballroom. A Passenger Pigeon comes, in slate-colored feathers and long tail, alighting on a dead limb of the tree above, and looking unutterable sweet things to his mate, who has immediately joined him. A Cuckoo is heard in the distance; and his cry of "cow, cow," reverberates through the aisles of the wood, like the long-drawn note of a flute, and, in its tender melancholy, almost changes the scene from one of joy to sadness, like a cloud passing

for a moment across the sun, upon a bright June day. There are two species of cuckoo in New England, one with its bill yellow, and the other black. They do not, like their European relative, live lives of shiftless elegance, laying their egg sin other birds' nests, there to be hatched and reared at foreign expense, but look after their own domestic affairs, in a way which does them much credit. That "they suck little birds' eggs to make their voice clear" is, however, much to be regretted. Their feathers are remarkably smooth and soft to the touch; and with their silvery-white breasts, slender bodies, and long tails, they make a very ornamental appearance.

Soon the slowly shifting rays of the sun light up immediately before us the spare and slender form of a young pitch-pine. Can that be a nest, which hangs suspended from its lowest twigs? What delight in such a discovery! A slender black bill and pair of fiery eyes appear above the edge of it; and we know it is the nest of a Red-Eyed Vireo. A thrifty pair they must be, who have begun house-keeping so early in the season.

The mother bird flies off, screaming sharply, and making a fine pretence of attack about the eyes and ears of her invader, but quickly retires to the oak-branch above; where she and her mate utter such noises, as if each were at work filing a saw. Attached to the very tips of the twigs, the nest swings to and fro with every zephyr that blows, with the green-lattice work of pine leaves above it, to protect its future inmates from the hotter suns of June. Skilfully woven from strips of bark, fibrous tissues of plants, and even pieces of newspaper, it is unsupported from beneath, and depends upon its own architectural strength to

bear up the weight within. It is only necessary to bend over the stem of the pine, in order to grasp the cup-shaped object; and behold the treasure it contains! Six eggs rest there. Four are pinkish white, with points of black upon their large ends; the other two of greater size, and speckled all over with brown. The first are the Vireo's own eggs, and the last those of an interloper, the Low Blackbird; who pursues the same method in the Western world that Cuckoos do in the Eastern, and risks in the hands of strangers, all the hopes and future of her race. She always selects for this sort of imposition, the nest of some bird that is smaller than herself, and one whose eggs are also more or less speckled or mottled, Vireos and the Yellow Bird being her especial favorites; which may be considered in the light of a compliment to the domestic virtues of those species. It must be the perfect symmetry of every thing about a bird's nest, which makes it so invariably an interesting object. Even the coarse and heavy structure of the Robin, built of mud and straw, has oftener called forth extravagant expressions of delight, than the work of our best architects. But the Vireo makes nest-building really one of the fine arts, and shows in it a superiority over the robin, as decided as that of Phidias to an ordinary carver. Every fibre is worked into its proper place with unrivalled nicety; and that same architectural law, the economy of materials, which had its share in producing the best Gothic cathedrals, is here fully exemplified. You might use it for a drinking-cup, although it would not last long for that purpose, not to speak of the unworthiness of putting it to such a service. In fact, of all the nests I know of, the Vireo's is the

most exquisite. It is like the Oriole's, but more refined.

The Water Thrush is a queer bird. He comes sauntering up the side of the brook, investigating things with his bill, and keeping his short tail in perpetual motion. Why that tail should oscillate so continually, is one of the facts in nature yet to be explained. The Peet Weet, who wades around the margin of the swamp yonder, has the same habit in an intensified degree. Two weeks from now, and the Water Thrush will have raked together a heap of dead pine and oak leaves, on the side of the hill, and made a nest out of them. It will look like nothing so much as a chance heap of leaves, but on one side, will have a narrow entrance, and within, a hollow, as smooth, compact, and round as if moulded on a cannon-ball.

They also call this bird the Oven-bird, from the fancy that its habitation resembles an oven; but it is more like an Esquimaux's hut in miniature. Just now, he does not think so much of nesting as of certain delicious insects, which live in the moss and under decaying logs. How those long yellow legs do strut up and down in the mud! Their feet are always wet; and yet they always take the next step as if afraid that it was going to wet them again. The gravity and deliberation of their movements is something for philosophers to admire. Where does that big blue fly come from, and where does he whisk off to so suddenly? He flew into my face; and I was perfectly defenceless before his audacity. Immediately upon the crackling of a dead stick, a loud harsh cry comes from above. Three great Bitterns start out of the top of a tall oak, and, after wheeling about several times, fly off above the tree tops, with their long bills extend-

ed in one direction, and their longer and featherless legs in the other. They look like gigantic wasps; and it is well they go, for they are disagreeable creatures at the best, though ludicrous to look at. The blue jay is another discordant creature, though very handsome; and, if you break those azure wings of his, with the charge from a shot-gun, all the little birds whose nests he robs will sing their most tuneful thanks to you.

A little deeper in the woods, where the tall dark forms of the pine-tree tower up on every side, and lead the eye into a labyrinth of fancied cathedral aisles; where the sound of feet is hushed upon a carpet woven of myriads of dead leaves, and sunshine hardly dares intrude, — here, too, there is somewhat worth living to enjoy. There is no freedom from care, like what one finds in that dim religious twilight, resting upon the eternal granite, and listening to that low, mysteriously murmuring sound, which was once the world's cradle-song. The bright-colored warblers and flycatchers are not to be found here. With all their brilliancy and vivacity, they are not serious enough to be in harmony with this great sanctuary of nature. Upon a lofty branch, all alone by himself, sits the Rose-breasted Grosbeak, with his front of carmine glowing beneath the intense black of head and neck. First of American songsters, he wastes no voice in twittering light tunes, but utters forth a melody so full and deep and earnest, and with such tender modulation, that its power takes entire possession of us, and we are willing to confess that this is the very Orpheus among birds. Sweet and low he sings; then high and clear, uniting, like the best poets, grace and vigor, tenderness and grandeur. Lovers of Beethoven's

Andantes might find in him also something of what they most admire in that great composer; it is a harmony almost melancholy, yet not depressing. Just at the moment, when it seems to be upon the verge of sadness, it rises again into all the strength and grandeur of an heroic symphony; while, behind it, the mighty murmuring of the pine-trees fills the same place as organ music at the concerts. It is true that the celebrated Mocking Bird is a wonderfully skilful imitator; but here we have original creation. The difference is like that between any Italian improvisatore, and Dante or Tasso. I do not know, but I should very much doubt, if a Mocking Bird would dare to imitate the Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Whatever mind there may be in such a creature must yet be genuine enough to yield before its true superior.

Who would not wish to rest in that retreat, and listen all day to such music? I once met in the mountains a clergyman, — perhaps the very one of whom Whittier has spoken in his "*Birds of Killingworth*," —

"A man whose very instinct was to kill," —

and he had just shot one of these peerless birds. He said that he mistook it for a woodpecker; and I suppose he did: though why he should shoot a woodpecker, either, was hard to tell. I looked at the poor wreck of beauty that he held before me, its rosy breast stained to deeper crimson, and thought, "How can this man pray for mercy, who seems to have so little? and how can he be properly a teacher of goodness, who has no greater respect for the beautiful?" It was not merely a question of cruelty to animals; it was deplorable that one should catch even a glimpse of a creature so fine, and not wish it to live forever.

The Rose-breasted Grosbeak is not a common bird, and is said to be growing rarer; which is probably the reason why it has never yet acquired that fame its loveliness deserves. Its life certainly ought to be protected by the most stringent regulations. The Cardinal Grosbeak, which inhabits the Southern States, is also one of the best of singers, but hardly equal to his Northern cousin, in the quite indescribable quality of his song; which perhaps might be better termed the poetic, than any thing else. His coloring, too, of complete scarlet, is rather too gaudy to suit a refined taste; though, as he flashes through the luxuriant tropical foliage, the impression he gives, as of a living flame, is one of those sights which cannot be forgotten.

Meanwhile, the day is marching on; and reluctantly we take our leave of sylvan things, and retrace our way back into the more exciting and discordant, and yet more important scenes of human life. However, let us turn aside, as we pass by the grove which we first entered, and enjoy a parting glance at what has already once given so much delight. There they all are again, the dear creatures, the charming sprites! We are surprised and dazzled afresh, as they frolic and dance and sing and flit about, taking aerial plunge-baths and somersaults; while the colors of their plumage gleam and sparkle, as if they were really precious gems upon the wing. That humming-bird with the blue effulgent head, perched on the spray of a young acacia, is certainly nothing less than a living sapphire. But what a noise they make! It is one continual jubilee chorus; and each individual sings with an energy and enthusiasm beyond the daring of any opera-girl. The sound comes from

every side at once, and seems to roll off in long undulations above the tree-tops, as heated air is seen ascending above a bonfire. In a chorus of birds you never hear a false note; and although each seems to be performing his own peculiar strain independent of the rest, yet they all mingle together without jarring or discord. Moreover, the crystal clearness of the sounds they utter far surpasses that of any human voice, or even the best violins. Their concert only lacks one quality, that harmony which comes from combination, and the infusion of one great mind in the theme of the song. There is unity in it; but it is rather the unity of conglomeration than of composition. The bird-spirit is not of that kind and quality which strives to express itself in the symphonies of Mozart and Beethoven. As was said a long time ago, one man is of more value than many sparrows; and, even at our highest pitch of admiration for the concert of the woods, we must confess to a certain amount of monotony in it. And yet we must not rashly conclude that intelligence is wanting altogether. Each Thrush and Finch and Warbler knows well what he is about, and, however narrow his sphere, has a character of his own, which he throws into his song with that pure single-heartedness which perhaps is worth more than any thing else. There is no special arrangement, no conductor of the orchestra; but Nature finds her own way to make them all sing together, and unite in a harmony whose import is of a truth so deep that mankind must still, for all ages, aspire to comprehend it.

What May brings, June takes away. In the short space of two weeks, the sylvan carnival is sure to come to its end. Most of the Warblers, Fly-catchers, and Sparrows fly further north;

and the few that remain betake themselves with the thrushes and the Rose-breasted Grosbeak in silence to the deeper recesses of the woods, there to be seen or heard from rarely; and the Red-eyed Vireo, singing high up in a sultry noon, alone is left of all that mirthful company. F. P. S.

ZERUB THROOP'S EXPERIMENT.

BY MRS. A. D. T. WHITNEY.

IV.

HOW THE GHOST MANAGED. — MRS. EYLETT BRIGHT'S STORY.

MY dear, I will tell you all about it. It was a haunted house. It was all explained by simple causes, — yes; but it was a haunted house, nevertheless. It is a haunted world we live in, for that matter, Dora Dutton.

You see there are so many of us, — so many little Eylett Brights: I like to call them by their whole patronymic, it suits them so well, Dutton dear.

We all needed the country that summer. I was run down with change of servants, and nursing; little Thode had just crept out of scarlet fever, with the tattered shreds of his dear little mortality about him, wanting all sorts of patching up; and the other children had had it too, more or less; mostly less, thank the good Providence! We all needed the country — doctor said we must have it; but there was Eylett tied down to his desk, and the two thousand was'n't any bigger for us this year than ever before.

The country is so wide and free; and yet it is so hard to get a place in it, — a place for ever so many little Eylett Brights!

We wanted a large house, and we wanted it furnished; there must be plenty of out-of-doors, and yet we

did not want a "place" that would have to be kept up. People who were going to Europe, and had out-of-town residences to leave, must leave them to their own sort, you know; carriage and lawn and garden people, who would have gardeners and grooms. It was as much as ever we could do to have Onie and Ann. More; for they were both going to leave. They had objections to the country. So we got Margaret and Ellen from the intelligence office, — the same article, you know, with a new label; and there isn't much variety in the labels, either. It is wonderful how we have rung over the changes, — Margaret and Katy and Ann; Bridget and Ann and Katy; Bridget and Margaret and Ellen; and how natural, of course, the name sounds, whichever it is, when they tell it; and how the impression of the whole successive multitude drifts and runs together in our minds into the image of one great, awful, representative — kitchen creature!

Well, we searched the papers, and we searched the country; we had spent fifteen dollars before we knew it, running out and in to see things, and conclude they wouldn't do. So we kept quiet a while, and almost gave it up. Eylett said we might hit upon something by and by, when somebody's house was left on their hands, too late for a high rent or a whole season. I didn't see how,

though. I told him it would have to come and hit upon us; we couldn't afford to go after it any more.

Things do come and hit you if you only stand still because you must, — not because you're lazy.

One day, at the counting-room, Mr. Haughton was asking Eylett after his family. Eylett told him he was getting along; but they needed a change, and it was not easy to make a plan that would suit in all ways.

"Take a house a little way out of town," said Mr. Haughton.

"I've been trying to," said Eylett; "but the house I want doesn't seem to be anywhere."

One of the boys came in from the bank just then, and heard it.

"I know of a house, Mr. Bright," he said; "but it's rather a queer one, up over the hill, out of our village; and to let cheap, I guess. Old Zerub Throop's. He's dead, and things aren't to be touched for five years. But the house can be hired just as it is, if anybody likes. It is a jolly big one, and an old garden and fields all round it. Why don't you come out and see it?"

Eylett guessed he would.

And so, one day, we went out to Rintheroote.

Why, you see, it was splendid! All that great hill, and the sunrise on one side, and the sunset the other! But, as to the house, it seemed as if the day had always had to climb over and round it, and had never shone through it. Such a musty, shady, lo-from-the-tombs old place you never got into! The front door was all grown up with weeds and vines. It was tall and narrow, with an old-fashioned fan-light over it. It looked as if nothing had ever gone in and out but coffins, I told Eylett.

We found a woman in the village

who had kept house there; and she went up with us, and showed it.

"It's in good order," she said; "the front part's clean, because it ain't never been dirtied; and the back part's clean, because I done the scrubbin'."

There was one real lovely room across the ell, up-stairs, at the end. Four windows, — east, south, and west, — the sun and the soft wind just rioting through.

"O Eylett!" I cried, standing in the middle, "here's the summer-time and the beauty! Here's the life of the house!"

"Yes'm," said Mrs. Hand, "here's where 'twas. But I'll tell you what, 'tain't more'n fair to let you know: I don't believe it's all gone out of it. *I don't believe, in my soul, Zerub's done with it!*"

She spoke in a hushed way, as if there might be some one listening.

"Done with it? He's dead!"

"Yes'm; that's just why you can't tell. I staid here a month afterwards, and I had — well — experiences. If I was you, I'd shet it up."

"Shut it up! I shall put the children into it."

"That may do. Maybe he'll quit them."

I had my doubts about that conclusion, if I hadn't about the ghost. I couldn't think, if he wanted to come at all, that old Zerub, or any other rational spirit, would come back the less for — you needn't laugh, Dutton; I don't care if they are mine!

"See here, my good woman!" says Eylett turning round sharp, "I can't come here if my servants and children are to get hold of this nonsense. Has it been talked round in the village?"

"Not from me; I've held my tongue too long for Zerub to begin chatter-

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